

## **The Refugee** by Pearl S. Buck

Genre: social problem

Theme: the aftermath of a natural disaster

Setting: city in China; flood

Characters: old man, noodle vendor, passer-by

**Summary:** Please put the paragraphs into the correct order:

An old man, too old for the heavy burden he is carrying, is the last of the procession. He can hardly keep up with the others. When he can no longer go on he sits down near a stand selling hot noodles. A man passing by takes pity on him and offers him some coins, although he himself does not know where his next meal is to come from. The old man is reluctant to take the money. He does not want to be thought a beggar and so explains the situation. He says that his people had good land, but that the river rose and they had no food left. In desperation they even ate the seed which had been bought for planting the land. He takes pains to defend his people, saying that they were too hungry and too inexperienced to think of the future, although he warned them not to eat the seed.

The passer-by drops a silver coin and a copper penny into the old man's apron and goes on his way. To the noodle vendor's surprise the old man does not spend all the money on food, but only the copper coin. He gives the noodles to his small grandson, whom he is carrying in one of his baskets. The boy's mother and father had died in the floods and the old man is now looking after the child. He himself only eats the few scraps left by the boy. Then he hands the bowl back to the astonished vendor, who cannot understand why a starving man with a silver coin does not buy more food for himself. The old man explains that the rest of the money is for seed. He says that the best thing he can do for his grandson is to buy seed to ensure against more starvation the following year.

The flooding of the river has forced the farmers of an unnamed country to leave their homelands and look for food and shelter in the capital a few hundred miles away. The city is full of ragged and starving refugees and nobody really knows how to cope with the problem. They have to live in great camps outside the city wall trying to find work and food. The situation is causing a lot of bitterness among the local inhabitants.

One day some new refugees arrive. They are different from the others in that they are not "riff-raff from some community always poor and easily starving in a flood time". They are all from the same region and are well-built, neatly and cleanly dressed and obviously take pride in themselves, despite their hopeless situation. There are, however, no young girls and no infants, which suggests that they must have perished during the floods while still working in the fields. All of them carry bedding and cauldrons, though there is no trace of food in any of them. The lack of food shows in their faces and in their apathy towards the things around them.

## **Unit I**

### **The Situation in the City**

#### **1. The situation in the city**

*Why did the refugees have to leave their land?*

*How do the refugees feel about the new place? Which words tell the reader that the place where they come from is very different from where they are now?*

*How does the time of year make the situation of the refugees even worse?*

*How do the local inhabitants feel about all the refugees in their city?*

*The crowd of refugees is described as a "horde" (25 5). This term expresses dislike. Which other word in the same paragraph describes the refugees in a way which shows how much the inhabitants dislike them being in the city? Look the word up in a dictionary. What does it compare the refugees with?*

*What ideas come to mind when you hear the word "horde"?*

## Unit II

### The Refugees

#### 1. The new refugees

*Despite the differences which exist between the new refugees and the others what do they have in common?*

common features: Feeling of alienation and estrangement They are as in a dream: apathy, lack of interest, no curiosity, indifference, despair, loss of hope, no confidence	
differences:	
<i>common refugees</i>	<i>new refugees</i>
they beg at doors	
they have no belongings	
tend to be poor wherever they are	
"clothed somehow" (24 14-15)	
they are "ragged" (24 16)	
riff-raff no-one is proud of	

## Unit III

### The significance of the title

*What makes the old man different from all the other refugees?*

## Unit IV

### Unanswered Questions; The Message

#### Topics for further discussion:

*What natural catastrophes threaten us?*

#### The message

*What can the reader learn from the story?*

**Suggestion for written work:**

*a) Imagine you are a citizen of the capital, a shopkeeper. You have had enough of all these refugees and do not want any more to come. You saw the new ones arrive yesterday. Write a letter to the editor of your local paper, explaining your point of view and demanding that something should be done about the situation. Words from the story will help you.*

*b) Imagine you are the person who gave the money to the old man. Write a letter to the editor of your local paper, explaining how you feel: say that you want the city to do more to help the refugees both in their present situation and in the future. Suggest some ways of preventing a second catastrophe. Explain what will happen if there is no long-term help.*

Start both letters with 'Dear sir' and end them with 'Yours faithfully'. Read the letters out in class and discuss them.